CHAPTER XX

INFLUENCING BY DESCRIPTION

The groves of Eden vanish'd now so long, Live in description, and look green in song.

—ALEXANDER POPE, *Windsor Forest*.

The moment our discourse rises above the ground-line of familiar facts, and is inflamed with passion or exalted thought, it clothes itself in images. A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that always a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. . . . This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is proper creation.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Nature*.

Like other valuable resources in public speaking, description loses its power when carried to an extreme. Over-ornamentation makes the subject ridiculous. A dust-cloth is a very useful thing, but why embroider it? Whether description shall be restrained within its proper and important limits, or be encouraged to run riot, is the personal choice that comes before every speaker, for man's earliest literary tendency is to depict.

The Nature of Description

To describe is to call up a picture in the mind of the hearer. "In talking of description we naturally speak of portraying, delineating, coloring, and all the devices of the picture painter. To describe is to visualize, hence we must look at description as a pictorial process, whether the writer deals with material or with spiritual objects."[1]

If you were asked to describe the rapid-fire gun you might go about it in either of two ways: give a cold technical account of its mechanism, in

whole and in detail, or else describe it as a terrible engine of slaughter, dwelling upon its effects rather than upon its structure.

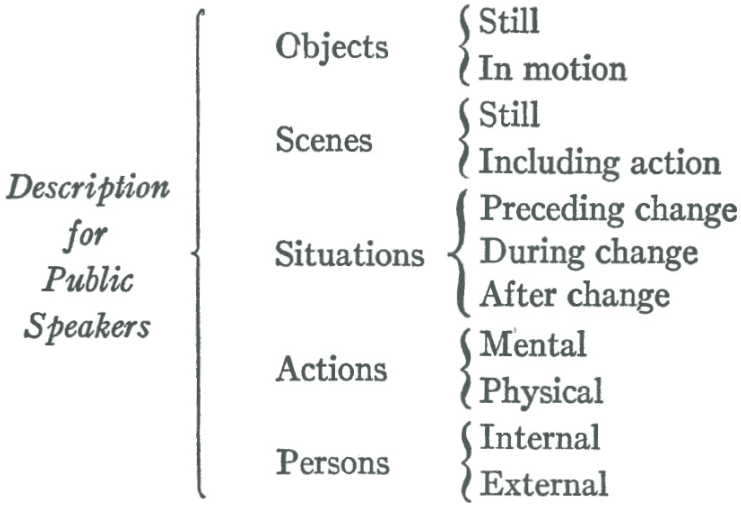
The former of these processes is exposition, the latter is true description. Exposition deals more with the *general*, while description must deal with the *particular*. Exposition elucidates *ideas*, description treats of *things*. Exposition deals with the *abstract*, description with the *concrete*. Exposition is concerned with the *internal*, description with the *external*. Exposition is *enumerative*, description *literary*. Exposition is *intellectual*, description *sensory*. Exposition is *impersonal*, description *personal*.

If description is a visualizing process for the hearer, it is first of all such for the speaker—he cannot describe what he has never seen, either physically or in fancy. It is this personal quality—this question of the personal eye which sees the things later to be described—that makes description so interesting in public speech. Given a speaker of personality, and we are interested in his personal view—his view adds to the natural interest of the scene, and may even be the sole source of that interest to his auditors.

The seeing eye has been praised in an earlier chapter (on "Subject and Preparation") and the imagination will be treated in a subsequent one (on "Riding the Winged Horse"), but here we must consider the *picturing mind*: the mind that forms the double habit of seeing things clearly—for we see more with the mind than we do with the physical eye—and then of re-imaging these things for the purpose of getting them before the minds' eyes of the hearers. No habit is more useful than that of visualizing clearly the object, the scene, the situation, the action, the person, about to be described. Unless that primary process is carried out clearly, the picture will be blurred for the hearer-beholder.

In a work of this nature we are concerned with the rhetorical analysis of description, and with its methods, only so far as may be needed for the practical purposes of the speaker.[1] The following grouping, therefore, will

not be regarded as complete, nor will it here be necessary to add more than a word of explanation:



Some of the foregoing processes will overlap, in certain instances, and all are more likely to be found in combination than singly.

When description is intended solely to give accurate information—as to delineate the appearance, not the technical construction, of the latest Zeppelin airship—it is called "scientific description," and is akin to exposition. When it is intended to present a free picture for the purpose of making a vivid impression, it is called "artistic description." With both of these the public speaker has to deal, but more frequently with the latter form. Rhetoricians make still further distinctions.

Methods of Description

In public speaking, *description should be mainly by suggestion*, not only because suggestive description is so much more compact and time-saving but because it is so vivid. Suggestive expressions connote more than they literally say—they suggest ideas and pictures to the mind of the hearer which supplement the direct words of the speaker. When Dickens, in his "Christmas Carol," says: "In came Mrs. Fezziwig, one vast substantial

smile," our minds complete the picture so deftly begun—a much more effective process than that of a minutely detailed description because it leaves a unified, vivid impression, and that is what we need. Here is a present-day bit of suggestion: "General Trinkle was a gnarly oak of a man—rough, solid, and safe; you always knew where to find him." Dickens presents Miss Peecher as: "A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little work-box, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman all in one." In his "Knickerbocker's" "History of New York," Irving portrays Wouter van Twiller as "a robustious beer-barrel, standing on skids."

Whatever forms of description you neglect, be sure to master the art of suggestion.

Description may be by simple hint. Lowell notes a happy instance of this sort of picturing by intimation when he says of Chaucer: "Sometimes he describes amply by the merest hint, as where the Friar, before setting himself down, drives away the cat. We know without need of more words that he has chosen the snuggest corner."

Description may depict a thing by its effects. "When the spectator's eye is dazzled, and he shades it," says Mozley in his "Essays," "we form the idea of a splendid object; when his face turns pale, of a horrible one; from his quick wonder and admiration we form the idea of great beauty; from his silent awe, of great majesty."

Brief description may be by epithet. "Blue-eyed," "white-armed," "laughter-loving," are now conventional compounds, but they were fresh enough when Homer first conjoined them. The centuries have not yet improved upon "Wheels round, brazen, eight-spoked," or "Shields smooth, beautiful, brazen, well-hammered." Observe the effective use of epithet in Will Levington Comfort's "The Fighting Death," when he speaks of soldiers in a Philippine skirmish as being "leeched against a rock."

Description uses figures of speech. Any advanced rhetoric will discuss their forms and give examples for guidance.[1] This matter is most important, be assured. A brilliant yet carefully restrained figurative style, a style marked by brief, pungent, witty, and humorous comparisons and characterizations, is a wonderful resource for all kinds of platform work.

Description may be direct. This statement is plain enough without exposition. Use your own judgment as to whether in picturing you had better proceed from a general view to the details, or first give the details and thus build up the general picture, but by all means BE BRIEF.

Note the vivid compactness of these delineations from Washington Irving's "Knickerbocker:"

> He was a short, square, brawny old gentleman, with a double chin, a mastiff mouth, and a broad copper nose, which was supposed in those days to have acquired its fiery hue from the constant neighborhood of his tobacco pipe.
>
> He was exactly five feet six inches in height, and six feet five inches in circumference. His head was a perfect sphere, and of such stupendous dimensions, that Dame Nature, with all her sex's ingenuity, would have been puzzled to construct a neck capable of supporting it; wherefore she wisely declined the attempt, and settled it firmly on the top of his backbone, just between the shoulders. His body was of an oblong form, particularly capacious at bottom; which was wisely ordered by Providence, seeing that he was a man of sedentary habits, and very averse to the idle labor of walking.

The foregoing is too long for the platform, but it is so good-humored, so full of delightful exaggeration, that it may well serve as a model of humorous character picturing, for here one inevitably sees the inner man in the outer.

Direct description for platform use may be made vivid by the *sparing* use of the "historical present." The following dramatic passage, accompanied by the most lively action, has lingered in the mind for thirty years after hearing Dr. T. De Witt Talmage lecture on "Big Blunders." The crack of the bat sounds clear even today:

Get ready the bats and take your positions. Now, give us the ball. Too low. Don't strike. Too high. Don't strike. There it comes like lightning. Strike! Away it soars! Higher! Higher! Run! Another base! Faster! Faster! Good! All around at one stroke!

Observe the remarkable way in which the lecturer fused speaker, audience, spectators, and players into one excited, ecstatic whole—just as you have found yourself starting forward in your seat at the delivery of the ball with "three on and two down" in the ninth inning. Notice, too, how—perhaps unconsciously—Talmage painted the scene in Homer's characteristic style: not as having already happened, but as happening before your eyes.

If you have attended many travel talks you must have been impressed by the painful extremes to which the lecturers go—with a few notable exceptions, their language is either over-ornate or crude. If you would learn the power of words to make scenery, yes, even houses, palpitate with poetry and human appeal, read Lafcadio Hearn, Robert Louis Stevenson, Pierre Loti, and Edmondo De Amicis.

Blue-distant, a mountain of carven stone appeared before them,—the Temple, lifting to heaven its wilderness of chiseled pinnacles, flinging to the sky the golden spray of its decoration.

—LAFCADIO HEARN, *Chinese Ghosts*.

The stars were clear, colored, and jewel-like, but not frosty. A faint silvery vapour stood for the Milky Way. All around me the black fir-points stood upright and stock-still. By the whiteness of the pack-saddle I could see Modestine walking round and round at the length of her tether; I could hear her steadily munching at the sward; but there was not another sound save the indescribable quiet talk of the runnel over the stones.

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *Travels with a Donkey*.

It was full autumn now, late autumn—with the nightfalls gloomy, and all things growing dark early in the old cottage, and all the Breton land looking sombre, too. The very days seemed but twilight; immeasurable clouds, slowly passing, would suddenly bring darkness at broad noon. The wind moaned constantly—it was like the sound of a great cathedral organ at a distance, but playing profane airs, or despairing dirges; at other times it would come close to the door, and lift up a howl like wild beasts.

—PIERRE LOTI, *An Iceland Fisherman*.

I see the great refectory,[1] where a battalion might have drilled; I see the long tables, the five hundred heads bent above the plates, the rapid motion of five hundred forks, of a thousand hands, and

sixteen thousand teeth; the swarm of servants running here and there, called to, scolded, hurried, on every side at once; I hear the clatter of dishes, the deafening noise, the voices choked with food crying out: “Bread—bread!” and I feel once more the formidable appetite, the herculean strength of jaw, the exuberant life and spirits of those far-off days.[2]

—EDMONDO DE AMICIS, *College Friends*.

Suggestions for the Use of Description

Decide, on beginning a description, what point of view you wish your hearers to take. One cannot see either a mountain or a man on all sides at once. Establish a view-point, and do not shift without giving notice.

Choose an attitude toward your subject—shall it be idealized? caricatured? ridiculed? exaggerated? defended? or described impartially?

Be sure of your mood, too, for it will color the subject to be described. Melancholy will make a rose-garden look gray.

Adopt an order in which you will proceed—do not shift backward and forward from near to far, remote to close in time, general to particular, large to small, important to unimportant, concrete to abstract, physical to mental; but follow your chosen order. Scattered and shifting observations produce hazy impressions just as a moving camera spoils the time-exposure.

Do not go into needless minutiæ. Some details identify a thing with its class, while other details differentiate it from its class. Choose only the significant, suggestive characteristics and bring those out with terse vividness. Learn a lesson from the few strokes used by the poster artist.

In determining what to describe and what merely to name, seek to read the knowledge of your audience. The difference to them between the unknown and the known is a vital one also to you.

Relentlessly cut out all ideas and words not necessary to produce the effect you desire. Each element in a mental picture either helps or hinders. Be sure they do not hinder, for they cannot be passively present in any discourse.

Interruptions of the description to make side-remarks are as powerful to destroy unity as are scattered descriptive phrases. The only visual impression that can be effective is one that is unified.

In describing, try to call up the emotions you felt when first you saw the scene, and then try to reproduce those emotions in your hearers. Description is primarily emotional in its appeal; nothing can be more deadly dull than a cold, unemotional outline, while nothing leaves a warmer impression than a glowing, spirited description.

Give a swift and vivid general view at the close of the portrayal. First and final impressions remain the longest. The mind may be trained to take in the characteristic points of a subject, so as to view in a single scene, action, experience, or character, a unified impression of the whole. To describe a thing as a whole you must first see it as a whole. Master that art and you have mastered description to the last degree.

SELECTIONS FOR PRACTISE

THE HOMES OF THE PEOPLE

I went to Washington the other day, and I stood on the Capitol Hill; my heart beat quick as I looked at the towering marble of my country's Capitol and the mist gathered in my eyes as I thought of its tremendous significance, and the armies and the treasury, and the judges and the President, and the Congress and the courts, and all that was gathered there. And I felt that the sun in all its course could not look down on a better sight than that majestic home of a republic that had taught the world its best lessons of liberty. And I felt that if honor and wisdom and justice abided therein, the world would at last owe to that great house in which the ark of the covenant of my country is lodged, its final uplifting and its regeneration.

Two days afterward, I went to visit a friend in the country, a modest man, with a quiet country home. It was just a simple, unpretentious house, set about with big trees, encircled in meadow and field rich with the promise of harvest. The fragrance of the pink and hollyhock in the front yard was mingled with the aroma of the orchard and of the gardens, and resonant with the cluck of poultry and the hum of bees.

Inside was quiet, cleanliness, thrift, and comfort. There was the old clock that had welcomed, in steady measure, every newcomer to the family, that had ticked the solemn requiem of the dead, and had kept company with the watcher at the bedside. There were the big, restful beds and the old, open fireplace, and the old family Bible, thumbed with the fingers of hands long since still, and wet with

the tears of eyes long since closed, holding the simple annals of the family and the heart and the conscience of the home.

Outside, there stood my friend, the master, a simple, upright man, with no mortgage on his roof, no lien on his growing crops, master of his land and master of himself. There was his old father, an aged, trembling man, but happy in the heart and home of his son. And as they started to their home, the hands of the old man went down on the young man's shoulder, laying there the unspeakable blessing of the honored and grateful father and ennobling it with the knighthood of the fifth commandment.

And as they reached the door the old mother came with the sunset falling fair on her face, and lighting up her deep, patient eyes, while her lips, trembling with the rich music of her heart, bade her husband and son welcome to their home. Beyond was the housewife, busy with her household cares, clean of heart and conscience, the buckler and helpmeet of her husband. Down the lane came the children, trooping home after the cows, seeking as truant birds do the quiet of their home nest.

And I saw the night come down on that house, falling gently as the wings of the unseen dove. And the old man—while a startled bird called from the forest, and the trees were shrill with the cricket's cry, and the stars were swarming in the sky—got the family around him, and, taking the old Bible from the table, called them to their knees, the little baby hiding in the folds of its mother's dress, while he closed the record of that simple day by calling down God's benediction on that family and that home. And while I gazed, the vision of that marble Capitol faded. Forgotten were its treasures and its majesty, and I said, "Oh, surely here in the homes of the people are lodged at last the strength and the responsibility of this government, the hope and the promise of this republic."

—HENRY W. GRADY.

SUGGESTIVE SCENES

One thing in life calls for another; there is a fitness in events and places. The sight of a pleasant arbor puts it in our mind to sit there. One place suggests work, another idleness, a third early rising and long rambles in the dew. The effect of night, of any flowing water, of lighted cities, of the peep of day, of ships, of the open ocean, calls up in the mind an army of anonymous desires and pleasures. Something, we feel, should happen; we know not what, yet we proceed in quest of it. And many of the happiest hours in life fleet by us in this vain attendance on the genius of the place and moment. It is thus that tracts of young fir, and low rocks that reach into deep soundings, particularly delight and torture me. Something must have happened in such places, and perhaps ages back, to members of my race; and when I was a child I tried to invent appropriate games for them, as I still try, just as vainly, to fit them with the proper story. Some places speak distinctly. Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set aside for shipwreck. Other spots again seem to abide their destiny, suggestive and impenetrable, "miching mallecho." The inn at Burford Bridge, with its arbours and green garden and silent, eddying river—though it is known already as the place where Keats wrote some of his *Endymion* and Nelson parted from his Emma—still seems to wait the coming of the appropriate legend. Within these ivied walls, behind these old

green shutters, some further business smoulders, waiting for its hour. The old Hawes Inn at the Queen's ferry makes a similar call upon my fancy. There it stands, apart from the town, beside the pier, in a climate of its own, half inland, half marine—in front, the ferry bubbling with the tide and the guard-ship swinging to her anchor; behind, the old garden with the trees. Americans seek it already for the sake of Lovel and Old-buck, who dined there at the beginning of the *Antiquary*. But you need not tell me—that is not all; there is some story, unrecorded or not yet complete, which must express the meaning of that inn more fully. ... I have lived both at the Hawes and Burford in a perpetual flutter, on the heel, as it seemed, of some adventure that should justify the place; but though the feeling had me to bed at night and called me again at morning in one unbroken round of pleasure and suspense, nothing befell me in either worth remark. The man or the hour had not yet come; but some day, I think, a boat shall put off from the Queen's ferry, fraught with a dear cargo, and some frosty night a horseman, on a tragic errand, rattle with his whip upon the green shutters at the inn at Burford.

—R. L. STEVENSON, *A Gossip on Romance*.

FROM "MIDNIGHT IN LONDON"

Clang! Clang! Clang! the fire-bells! Bing! Bing! Bing! the alarm! In an instant quiet turns to uproar—an outburst of noise, excitement, clamor—bedlam broke loose; Bing! Bing! Bing! Rattle, clash and clatter. Open fly the doors; brave men mount their boxes. Bing! Bing! Bing! They're off! The horses tear down the street like mad. Bing! Bing! Bing! goes the gong!

"Get out of the track! The engines are coming! For God's sake, snatch that child from the road!"

On, on, wildly, resolutely, madly fly the steeds. Bing! Bing! the gong. Away dash the horses on the wings of fevered fury. On whirls the machine, down streets, around corners, up this avenue and across that one, out into the very bowels of darkness, whiffing, wheezing, shooting a million sparks from the stack, paving the path of startled night with a galaxy of stars. Over the house-tops to the north, a volcanic burst of flame shoots out, belching with blinding effect. The sky is ablaze. A tenement house is burning. Five hundred souls are in peril. Merciful Heaven! Spare the victims! Are the engines coming? Yes, here they are, dashing down the street. Look! the horses ride upon the wind; eyes bulging like balls of fire; nostrils wide open. A palpitating billow of fire, rolling, plunging, bounding, rising, falling, swelling, heaving, and with mad passion bursting its red-hot sides asunder, reaching out its arms, encircling, squeezing, grabbing up, swallowing everything before it with the hot, greedy mouth of an appalling monster.

How the horses dash around the corner! Animal instinct, say you? Aye, more. Brute reason.

"Up the ladders, men!"

The towering building is buried in bloated banks of savage, biting elements. Forked tongues dart out and in, dodge here and there, up and down, and wind their cutting edges around every object. A crash, a dull, explosive sound, and a puff of smoke leaps out. At the highest point upon the roof stands a dark figure in a desperate strait, the hands making frantic gestures, the arms swinging wildly —and then the body shoots off into frightful space, plunging upon the pavement with a revolting

thud. The man's arm strikes a bystander as he darts down. The crowd shudders, sways, and utters a low murmur of pity and horror. The faint-hearted lookers-on hide their faces. One woman swoons away.

"Poor fellow! Dead!" exclaims a laborer, as he looks upon the man's body.

"Aye, Joe, and I knew him well, too! He lived next door to me, five flights back. He leaves a widowed mother and two wee bits of orphans. I helped him bury his wife a fortnight ago. Ah, Joe! but it's hard lines for the orphans."

A ghastly hour moves on, dragging its regiment of panic in its trail and leaving crimson blotches of cruelty along the path of night.

"Are they all out, firemen?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"No, they're not! There's a woman in the top window holding a child in her arms—over yonder in the right-hand corner! The ladders, there! A hundred pounds to the man who makes the rescue!"

A dozen start. One man more supple than the others, and reckless in his bravery, clambers to the top rung of the ladder.

"Too short!" he cries. "Hoist another!"

Up it goes. He mounts to the window, fastens the rope, lashes mother and babe, swings them off into ugly emptiness, and lets them down to be rescued by his comrades.

"Bravo, fireman!" shouts the crowd.

A crash breaks through the uproar of crackling timbers.

"Look alive, up there! Great God! The roof has fallen!"

The walls sway, rock, and tumble in with a deafening roar. The spectators cease to breathe. The cold truth reveals itself. The fireman has been carried into the seething furnace. An old woman, bent with the weight of age, rushes through the fire line, shrieking, raving, and wringing her hands and opening her heart of grief.

"Poor John! He was all I had! And a brave lad he was, too! But he's gone now. He lost his own life in savin' two more, and now—now he's there, away in there!" she repeats, pointing to the cruel oven.

The engines do their work. The flames die out. An eerie gloom hangs over the ruins like a formidable, blackened pall.

And the noon of night is passed.

—ARDENNES JONES-FOSTER.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Write two paragraphs on one of these: the race horse, the motor boat, golfing, tennis; let the first be pure exposition and the second pure description.

2. Select your own theme and do the same in two short extemporaneous speeches.

3. Deliver a short original address in the over-ornamented style.

4. (*a*) Point out its defects; (*b*) recast it in a more effective style; (*c*)show how the one surpasses the other.

5. Make a list of ten subjects which lend themselves to description in the style you prefer.

6. Deliver a two-minute speech on any one of them, using chiefly, but not solely, description.

7. For one minute, look at any object, scene, action, picture, or person you choose, take two minutes to arrange your thoughts, and then deliver a short description—all without making written notes.

8. In what sense is description more *personal* than exposition?

9. Explain the difference between a scientific and an artistic description.

10. In the style of Dickens and Irving (pages 234, 235), write five separate sentences describing five characters by means of suggestion—one sentence to each.

11. Describe a character by means of a hint, after the manner of Chaucer (p. 235).

12. Read aloud the following with special attention to gesture:

His very throat was moral. You saw a good deal of it. You looked over a very low fence of white cravat (whereof no man had ever beheld the tie, for he fastened it behind), and there it lay, a valley between two jutting heights of collar, serene and whiskerless before you. It seemed to say, on the part of Mr. Pecksniff, "There is no deception, ladies and gentlemen, all is peace, a holy calm pervades me." So did his hair, just grizzled with an iron gray, which was all brushed off his forehead, and stood bolt upright, or slightly drooped in kindred action with his heavy eyelids. So did his person, which was sleek though free from corpulency. So did his manner, which was soft and oily. In a word, even his plain black suit, and state of widower, and dangling double eye-glass, all tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud, "Behold the moral Pecksniff!"

—CHARLES DICKENS, *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

13. Which of the following do you prefer, and why?

She was a blooming lass of fresh eighteen, plump as a partridge, ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father's peaches.

—IRVING.

She was a splendidly feminine girl, as wholesome as a November pippin, and no more mysterious than a window-pane.

—O. HENRY.

Small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom was Miss Peecher; cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice.

—DICKENS.

14. Invent five epithets, and apply them as you choose (p. 235).

15. (*a*) Make a list of five figures of speech; (*b*) define them; (*c*) give an example—preferably original—under each.

16. Pick out the figures of speech in the address by Grady, on page 240.

17. Invent an original figure to take the place of any one in Grady's speech.

18. What sort of figures do you find in the selection from Stevenson, on page 242?

19. What methods of description does he seem to prefer?

20. Write and deliver, without notes and with descriptive gestures, a description in imitation of any of the authors quoted in this chapter.

21. Reëxamine one of your past speeches and improve the descriptive work. Report on what faults you found to exist.

22. Deliver an extemporaneous speech describing any dramatic scene in the style of "Midnight in London."

23. Describe an event in your favorite sport in the style of Dr. Talmage. Be careful to make the delivery effective.

24. Criticise, favorably or unfavorably, the descriptions of any travel talk you may have heard recently.

25. Deliver a brief original travel talk, as though you were showing pictures.

26. Recast the talk and deliver it "without pictures."

[1] *Writing the Short-Story*, J. Berg Esenwein.

[1] For fuller treatment of Description see Genung's *Working Principles of Rhetoric*, Albright's *Descriptive Writing*, Bates' *Talks on Writing English*, first and second series, and any advanced rhetoric.

[1] See also *The Art of Versification*, J. Berg Esenwein and Mary Eleanor Roberts, pp. 28-35; and *Writing the Short-Story*, J. Berg Esenwein, pp. 152-162; 231-240.

[1] In the Military College of Modena.

[2] This figure of speech is known as "Vision."